turn the white snow red

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turn the white snow red

by schweet_heart

Summary

There are tears on his cheeks by the time he's finished, but he wipes them away without acknowledgement. Pointless to cry over what must be done. Pointless to waste his tears on a sorcerer.

Written for Winter Knights 2017.

Notes

One day I swear I will have a fic with no comma errors at all, but today was obviously not that day. Please excuse any and all factual errors in this fic: I did do my research (that is, I googled like a boss), but there's only so much you can learn from Wikipedia and Survivalist websites. At least now I know what not to do if I ever get lost in the woods.

This was originally written for Merlin Carols 2016, but never finished. Inspired by White Winter Hymnal.

Content note: This fic contains graphic depictions of physical illness/injury, mentions of past canon-typical violence, questionable medical practices (including forcible restraint for medical purposes and mentions of vomiting), violence to and by a wild animal and animal death. Please check the tags and proceed accordingly!

Chapter 1

Merlin falls behind after the first half a league; after two, Arthur is forced to stop and wait for him, leaning up against a tree in the cold wind and fixing his gaze somewhere to the left of where he expects Merlin to appear. Superstition tells him that he shouldn't look his manservant in the eye – it's too easy for sorcerers to trap you that way, according to his father, and in any case the last thing he needs is Merlin turning that puppy-dog gaze on him in an attempt to get him to change his mind. He's already doing more than he would for anyone else. He will not let Merlin use his weakness against him.

Minutes pass. Merlin does not appear, and Arthur stamps his feet in the snow, wondering if Merlin has done the honourable thing and taken his fate out of Arthur's hands. He won't reach the border alone, that much is certain, for Merlin is a proverbial babe in the woods when it comes to basic survival skills, but he's not liable to have turned back either. Arthur has made it perfectly clear that the only thing waiting for him in Camelot is death.

More likely, the idiot can't keep up and has stopped somewhere to catch his breath, regardless of the fact that evening is coming on and the clouds overhead are already threatening snow. With a sigh, Arthur pushes himself upright and sets off back the way he has come, following his own footprints back through the underbrush in search of his wayward manservant. The woods are close and pale, at once too shadowed and too bright as the sun begins to set over the western horizon. Arthur listens with half an ear to the sound of birds singing somewhere in the trees, wondering how everything can seem so ordinary when in fact the whole world has changed.

He finds Merlin about where he had expected, sitting at the base of a tree with the heels of his hands pressed against his forehead and his eyes closed.

"Get up," Arthur demands, toeing Merlin's leg for emphasis. "We're still a long way from the border."

"Can't." Merlin doesn't look up, remaining curled in on himself like a hibernating squirrel, his shoulders hunched up around his ears against the cold. He looks pathetic. Arthur nudges him with his boot again, hard.

“Get up,” he repeats. “I’m not just going to leave you here, so it’s no use pretending you can’t go on.”

Merlin doesn’t move. “Just g-go,” he says. “I swear, I’ll leave Camelot by f-first light, like you asked. You won’t see me again. I just need to rest for a m-minute.”

For some reason, the chattering of Merlin’s teeth irritates Arthur beyond all endurance. Bending down, he grasps his manservant’s arm and hauls him to his feet, letting go only when Merlin lets out a cry of pain and Arthur has to catch hold of both his shoulders to keep him upright.

“You’re hurt,” Arthur realises, catching sight of the blood staining Merlin’s tunic for the first time. Merlin nods, gasping, and Arthur mentally reviews the skirmish that had precipitated this little mess. Merlin had been out of sight for most of it, only stepping in at the last moment to keep Arthur from being impaled by a brigand he’d thought already dispatched. The mere memory of it makes Arthur flush with rage and shame, but he has to acknowledge that Merlin’s magic saved his life; beyond that, Arthur had been paying more attention to the bandits than his servant, so there had been ample opportunity for Merlin to have been injured without his having noticed. “You should have said something.”

“Why?” Merlin’s voice is bitter. “Would it have m-made any difference?”

Arthur doesn’t answer. Merlin’s breathing is laboured in the small silence, and Arthur studies him, taking in the blue-tinged lips and shivering frame. Camelot is not an option, being both too far away and too dangerous; they are closer to the border of Essetir, but even so the nearest village is miles away. Arthur had deliberately chosen an isolated route out of the kingdom in order to avoid his father’s patrols, but what had seemed a good idea at the time now seems the height of folly in light of Merlin’s condition.

Still, they’re not going to get far like this, and while he knows there are some caves further up the mountain, he has his doubts about whether Merlin will be able to reach them. He eases Merlin back down into a sitting position and crouches beside him, noting with alarm the extreme pallor of his skin. His forehead is beaded with sweat and clammy to the touch, and with a sinking heart Arthur recognises the symptoms of shock and possible hypothermia.

“You little idiot,” he mutters, carefully peeling back the soaked tunic and coat to inspect the injury. “I can’t believe you thought you could walk to Essetir like this. Were you trying to save the executioner the effort? Or does all that magic leave no room for common sense?”

Merlin presses his lips together and turns his head away, and Arthur growls with frustration. He yanks the neckerchief free from around Merlin’s throat, folds it into a neat square and bundles it against the wound, then takes one of Merlin’s limp hands and presses it down firmly until he whimpers with pain. “Keep your hand there,” he says tightly. “Don’t let up on the pressure. I’m going to find us some firewood so that we don’t both freeze to death.”

He stalks away before Merlin can reply, crashing through the brush as he gives free rein to his temper. It would serve Merlin right if Arthur left him there and went back to Camelot on his own. It’s what he should do, really. He can only imagine what his father would say if he knew Arthur was risking his life for a servant, let alone one who had already proven himself to be a traitor of the worst sort. Then again, it was also his father who had taught Arthur the knight’s code, and it would be the height of dishonour to leave a wounded man alone in the woods to die. Arthur’s duty in this situation is clear, no matter what Uther might think of the prospect.

When he gets back, Merlin is sitting where he left him, knees drawn up and one hand still clamped tight against his side. His ragged breathing makes it sound like he’s trying not to cry.

“You came back.”

“Where else would I go?” Arthur drops the wood by Merlin’s feet and starts arranging some of it to make a fire, scraping out a shallow depression in the snow until he hits the hard-packed earth beneath. “Much as I might like to, I can’t just leave you here.”

Merlin doesn’t respond; he just sits there watching through slitted eyes as Arthur tries to coax the kindling to a spark. The wood is damp—which is only to be expected, given the weather—and refuses to catch, but Arthur sits there doggedly as the light fades and keeps trying, unwilling to give up. Without some kind of warmth, they have no chance of lasting through the night, and he’ll be damned if he’s going to die with only a *sorcerer* for company.

Finally, Merlin says quietly, “I can do it.”

“Do what?” Arthur asks, his attention concentrated on the hopeless

little pile in front of him. The cold is seeping in even through his fur-lined cloak and gloves, making his fingers clumsy. “You can’t even stand up properly.”

“I can do it,” Merlin insists. “Just—move out the way for second, so I can see.”

Arthur huffs out a breath. “Fine.” He drops the sticks he’s been holding and steps away from the makeshift fire-pit, folding his arms across his chest. For a moment, nothing happens. Then Merlin holds out a tentative hand, his eyes flashing gold as he says something in a language Arthur doesn’t understand. An instant later, Arthur flinches as a fire crackles merrily into life, the wood catching as easily as if it were burning in a dry grate instead of on the icy ground.

“I suppose you think that’s impressive,” Arthur grumbles, once he’s recovered from the shock. “A child could produce the same result, without much effort.”

When Merlin doesn’t answer, Arthur glances towards him, expecting a pout or another stony expression. His manservant is slumped against the trunk with his eyes closed, his free hand resting limply in the snow. For a moment, Arthur’s breath sticks in his throat.

“Merlin?” Arthur kneels beside him and tugs off a glove, laying two fingers against his neck in search of a pulse. “Hey. Merlin.”

But Merlin isn’t listening anymore, and he’s not shivering either. The pulse under Arthur’s fingers is weak and thready. Swearing quietly, Arthur manhandles Merlin’s unresisting body closer to the fire and crouches down to check on his wound. It’s deep and ragged, the inevitable result of a well-aimed thrust with a blunted blade. Merlin’s neckerchief is already soaked with blood and despite the pressure the bleeding shows no signs of stopping.

Arthur sucks in air through his teeth. As a general rule, he is better suited to inflicting injuries than fixing them, but he’s survived enough battle wounds to know that if he doesn’t find some way to stop the bleeding soon, Merlin will die.

“I should have known you’d get into trouble,” Arthur mutters, pressing the neckerchief back into place and weighting it with snow. “I don’t care if you do have magic, you’re hopeless in a fight.”

Merlin doesn’t stir. Ideally, of course, at this point Arthur would summon Gaius and have him stitch up the wound, or, failing that, he

would contrive some way to do it himself. But here they have no Gaius and no supplies, and there is no way Merlin can wait while Arthur procures some, even if he knew where he might find needle and thread in the middle of the wilderness. There is only one option left, and Arthur takes it without hesitation, unsheathing his sword from around his waist and positioning it so that the tip is buried in the centre of the fire. A last resort, to be sure, but with any luck it will be an effective one.

While the metal heats, Arthur busies himself by building a shelter. They are fairly well protected here, nestled in the lee of a large oak where the drifts are shallowest, but, even so, the prince sets about scraping together a kind of den out of the snow, shielding them from the wind and further snowfall during the night. By the time he's finished, the woods are fully dark, and outside their little bubble of warmth the temperature has plummeted, an occasional flurry of flakes drifting down. In the fire the waiting blade glows red hot, nearly white. Arthur pulls it out and lets it cool a little—too hot, and he risks damaging the healthy skin as well as sealing the wound—then, taking a deep breath, he settles into the snow at Merlin's side and presses the edges of the gash together with one hand, touching the tip of the sword against his skin.

Merlin screams. An instant later, Arthur is flung backwards by an invisible force, landing hard against the trunk of a tree several meters away. The sword flies from his fingers, plunging tip-first in a snowdrift with an audible hiss, and for a moment Arthur fights to catch his breath, wondering what on earth just happened. It's only when he looks back at Merlin and sees the telltale glow of his eyes that he remembers: Merlin has magic. Magic powerful enough that he doesn't need to be conscious to use it, something Arthur has never heard of until now.

Struggling to his feet in the clinging snow, he retrieves the sword and returns it to the fire, then approaches Merlin more cautiously. His manservant is breathing hard and fast, eyes brimming golden with untrammelled power, yet he recoils when Arthur comes into view, raising both hands as if to fend off an attack. Arthur catches his wrists before he can do any more damage, but even in his weakened state Merlin is difficult to pin down.

"Merlin, for God's sake, be still. I'm trying to help you," Arthur grits out, wrestling Merlin's arms back to his sides and straddling his chest to hold him in place. Merlin twists and thrashes beneath him, gold light flickering beneath his eyelids, but he doesn't attempt to use his

magic again. Perhaps he understands, or perhaps he's just too weak now to use his powers with any great efficacy. Either way, Arthur takes full advantage of his incapacity to snatch up his sword from the fire and resume the process. This time, Merlin doesn't scream, but the bitten-off cries he makes are almost worse. Arthur works on with grim determination, his stomach roiling at the scent of burning flesh, sweat sticking his tunic to his back in spite of the cold.

There are tears on his cheeks by the time he's finished, but he wipes them away without acknowledgement. Pointless to cry over what must be done. Pointless to waste his tears on a sorcerer.

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The plan works, up to a point. Although Merlin's side stops bleeding, Arthur returns from setting snares in the early hours of the morning to find his manservant tossing and turning in his sleep, his entire body drenched with sweat. A brief touch to his forehead is enough to confirm the worst: Merlin is running a high fever, his skin burning under Arthur's hand. Arthur checks the site of the brand to be sure, but it's obvious at a glance that the wound has become infected—not an unexpected outcome, under the circumstances, but certainly not a welcome one.

At this point, Arthur can think of only two choices: do nothing and hope for the best, or leave Merlin here while he tries to find something that will help to bring the fever down. Neither seems calculated to produce much success. It's the dead of winter, with emphasis on the *dead*: most of the plants in the vicinity have already shed their leaves or been buried by snow. Merlin may be stronger than he looks, but he's still far too insubstantial to put up much of a fight, and there's no way he can be left to survive the fever unaided.

In all likelihood, no matter what decisions Arthur makes from here on out, Merlin is going to die. Surely even the strictest definition of honour must now be satisfied, but Arthur still finds it impossible just to walk away. He thought he saw a patch of what looked like yarrow in one of the hollows where he laid his traps, and if he can make some of it into a tisane for Merlin to drink, it should ease the pain somewhat and help to reduce his temperature. Either way, he has little to lose by making the attempt.

He finds the plant where he remembers seeing it, a clump of flat-topped stalks, half buried beneath a rotten log. Brushing aside the freshly fallen snow reveals a handful of withered stems and brittle leaves that are so fragile some of them flake off as Arthur tries to pick them. In the end, he opts to simply sever the stems wholesale, bundling the fragments up in the lower half of his tunic and cradling them carefully as he walks back to camp. He nearly falls, twice—the hazards of not being able to see where he's putting his feet—but manages not to lose too many of the precious plants to the cold breeze, so he counts that as a win.

The problem, of course, is that without a proper container he has no way of boiling the water he needs. Dumping the yarrow in Merlin's lap, Arthur tucks his cloak more securely around his manservant's shoulders and contemplates the situation. Of course, it would be a great deal easier if he had magic—then he could wave his hand and create the things he needed out of thin air, or just boil the water himself, no pots required. Arthur wouldn't put it past Merlin to do most of his chores that way, if he could get away with it. Unfortunately for both of them, Merlin is hardly in any shape to be casting any spells just at the moment, so Arthur has to resort to more practical means of solving the problem: namely, by digging.

Some years before Merlin had arrived in Camelot, when Arthur was still young enough to think war was an exciting game played by adults, he had spent long hours in the armoury listening to Sir Leon and the other knights recount tales of their adventures. Later, he recognised that many of those stories must have been heavily edited to accommodate his innocent ears, but at the time he remembered being thrilled to hear first-hand accounts of the glory of battle. One such episode had involved an occasion when Sir Leon, Sir Bedivere and several other knights had been stranded in enemy territory without provisions, cut off from their supplies. Bedivere had made up some guff about his heroic tracking abilities which had helped them to hunt down a herd of deer, thus saving them from starvation, but it is Leon's description of boiling water without a pot that now seems the more important.

As far as Arthur can remember, the idea was to carve a shallow depression out of the ground next to the fire, then pack the sides with clay. Once the vessel had set, water could be poured into it and boiled using heated stones from the campfire. Of course, Leon had been forced to use his helmet to ferry water from a nearby stream, but here the solution is easy: the woods are thick with fallen snow, which is eminently transportable, and, once melted, it could easily be brought

to the boil using the same method. The trick would be to find stones that were dry enough to warm in the fire; if they were too damp, Leon had warned him, they were liable to explode, which would likely have unpleasant results for all concerned.

“I don’t suppose you could help, at all?” Arthur grumbles to Merlin, who is now curled shivering under his makeshift blanket. His manservant mutters something unintelligible but otherwise does not reply, and Arthur sighs. As usual, it falls to him to do most of the actual work.

To his surprise, putting Leon’s idea into practice turns out to be much easier than he anticipated. Digging up the frozen ground is a little difficult, but he is able to clear away a sizeable section of earth with the help of his hunting knife. He even manages to find a handful of good-sized stones that have been dried out by the winter sun, tucking them into the fire without incident. When he drops the first one into the pit, it sinks into the snow with barely a sizzle, but when he adds the second the snow is already beginning to melt. By the time he adds the fifth stone, the water is boiling away merrily, and Arthur drops in the yarrow leaves before realising he doesn’t have a cup from which Merlin can drink. Eventually, he is forced to hollow out the end of an old branch into a crude sort of drinking bowl, which he then uses to tip some of the mixture down Merlin’s throat.

Merlin promptly vomits it up.

“Typical.” Rolling him onto his side so he doesn’t choke, Arthur rubs Merlin’s back until the worst has passed. The other man shudders under his hands, and Arthur is struck anew by how vulnerable he is like this, even with his magic; how utterly dependent he is on Arthur to save him. “All right. Let’s try this again.”

He is more gentle this time, holding Merlin propped in the crook of his arm and using small amounts, tipping only a little bit of liquid into Merlin’s mouth before closing it and stroking his throat until he swallows. This time, most of the mixture stays down.

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It’s late afternoon by the time he’s finished, his back and arms cramped and stiff and his stomach aching with hunger. There’s

nothing more he can do for Merlin if he stays, so he returns to his snares and is pleased to find a brace of rabbits caught in the trap. It will last them for a day or two, if he's sparing with the meat, and with any luck he'll be able to catch some more tomorrow.

He takes his time disentangling the rabbits from the vines, using his knife where the knotted plants prove stubborn. That done, he resets the snares in the hopes of enticing more game and ties the legs of the coneys together with some twine for ease of carrying. He doesn't mean to leave Merlin alone for so long, but he's too cold to move quickly and it's delicate work, meaning that it is early dusk before he turns back towards the campsite.

He is still some distance away when he hears Merlin shout, and then a sudden yelp as if from an animal. Breaking into a proper run, Arthur bursts out of the undergrowth to see a strange tableau unfolding before him: Merlin, huddled on the ground, has one hand outstretched and the other pulled tight against him, droplets of bright red blood staining the snow at his feet. In front of him, part-way between Arthur and his manservant, a startled wolf is picking itself up, regarding Merlin with equal parts wariness and appetite as it gets to its feet.

Arthur has no weapon. His sword, still sheathed in its scabbard, rests on the other side of the fire, his hunting knife returned to its place in his boot and in any case woefully inadequate. Merlin is already trembling visibly, and Arthur knows he couldn't, shouldn't trust to magic, even if the sorcerer were well enough to use it. The only other option is to trust his instincts, and hope against hope that their usual luck will hold.

"Merlin," he says, very quietly. The wolf turns towards him, ears back, its whitened muzzle streaked with blood, and Arthur finds himself staring directly into its golden eyes as he braces himself to inch towards the fire. "Don't make any sudden movements, okay? I'm going to try and scare it off." A beat. "Nod if you understand me."

There is no response. Merlin has curled in on himself, arm still outstretched, his breathing coming fast and ragged through his open mouth. It's unclear if he's even conscious at this point, his blue eyes unfocused and half-lidded, as if on the brink of sleep. Cursing internally, Arthur continues his slow trek forwards. There are only a few more steps before he can reach his sword; a few more steps to bring them both to safety. He breaks into a run.

Time slows. It takes a moment before Arthur realises that this is not a

natural phenomenon but a force: the same force that drags against his body like a weight while the wolf gathers itself and lopes towards him. He has a moment to register the horror of it, and the fact that his own limbs are refusing to obey him, before the wolf is crouching, lunging—and gone, flung into a tree on the other side of the fire with another audible yelp. As Arthur stares, still stunned by the speed with which the encounter has unfolded, the wolf drops to the ground and lies limp, its body broken. The impact has snapped its spine in two.

Time starts again. Merlin lowers his hand and Arthur follows it down, dropping to his knees in the snow as Merlin's magic releases him. Bile rises in his throat and he swallows it, gagging, sucking in breath after breath of the cold mountain air.

Merlin had stopped the bandit in exactly the same way.

Arthur's hands dig into the snow, a slow chill stiffening his fingers. Merlin had stopped the bandit in exactly the same way, and in the brief moment before the man had been yanked backward, Arthur had seen it in his eyes: the knowledge, the sensation of being gripped by a force that was powerful beyond all comprehension. He had seen the bandit's horror morph into resignation, the look of a prey animal trapped in a predator's grasp. He can still hear the sickening crack as Merlin broke his neck.

He pushes himself to his feet. Ignoring the animal's corpse, he staggers over to Merlin's side and kneels next to him, looking down to where Merlin is cradling his bitten hand against his chest.

"Let me see," he says, his voice hoarse. Merlin doesn't resist as Arthur takes him by the arm to examine the punctured flesh. The bite is shallow, thank god, and seems to have missed any major arteries, but the blood is still a shocking red against the snow. "I'll clean it for you, and you'll be good as new," Arthur tells him, hating himself for how relieved he sounds. "It won't even leave a scar."

There has to be some kind of enchantment in it, somewhere, the way he can watch Merlin kill and kill yet speak so tenderly to him. When he looks at Merlin, he doesn't see a terrifying sorcerer bent on Camelot's destruction: he sees the man who trips over his own feet serving the ale, who intentionally scares away the game on a hunt and cries over dead unicorns. The knowledge that Merlin has resorted to cold-blooded murder for his sake makes a strange sort of grief rise in his chest that he's not sure he can explain, even to himself.

Merlin whispers, “You won’t tell him, will you?”

Arthur looks at him. His eyes are still glazed with fever, but he’s watching Arthur intently as he tends to his wrist, his breathing shallow.

“Won’t tell who?” Arthur asks. The cuts are as clean as he can get them, so he tears a strip from his tunic and begins to wrap it around the wounds, pulling the bandage as tight as he dares. “My father? I wasn’t planning to.”

“No.” Merlin shakes his head. “Arthur. Promise you won’t tell Arthur.”

Arthur’s fingers fumble where he’s trying to make a knot. In his delirium, Merlin has apparently mistaken him for someone else; a knight from the patrol, perhaps, someone he might have known or spoken to. He isn’t sure which one, and he uses that as an excuse to put off answering, bending his head close as he struggles to pull the last end of bandage over and through. He ties it off with difficulty, and when he rests his hand against the join, it clenches momentarily into a fist.

“Why not?” he asks, when he can trust his voice. “He has to find out eventually.”

“You mustn’t tell him,” Merlin repeats, his tone urgent. “He can’t know what I am, please, promise me!”

“Why can’t he know?” Arthur stares down at Merlin’s bandaged wrist. What is Merlin afraid of, when he could kill Arthur with a single thought?

“Please,” Merlin persists. He’s scrabbling at Arthur’s tunic, pushing up painfully onto one elbow to beg despite the fact that it makes him go white to the lips. “Please don’t tell him. Please—he can’t—you mustn’t —— ”

His voice is high and fearful, like a child’s, and Arthur suddenly feels sick. “I won’t,” he promises, disentangling himself from Merlin’s fevered grip. “I swear. I won’t tell the prince.”

He has to repeat the promise several times, but at last Merlin seems to accept it. He subsides amidst the folds of Arthur’s cloak and curls onto his uninjured side, agitated but no longer frightened. Without thinking, Arthur gentles him with a touch, pushing the sweaty hair back off his forehead. His eyes flicker open.

“Hurts.”

“I know,” Arthur agrees. It does hurt. “But I suppose that’s what happens when you decide to play with wolves.”

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Unlike the previous night, this time once the sun goes down Arthur doesn’t even attempt to sleep. Instead, he tends to Merlin, holding him wrapped in his cloak and forcing more tisane down his throat every few hours, until there’s nothing left but the dregs. He guts and roasts both of the rabbits, curing them in strips over the fire, and spends the rest of the time staring into the flames, waiting for the medicine to do its work.

There is something awful about the silence here. Above them, disappearing into a grey mist, the snow-covered trees seem to crowd close together, muffling the crackling of the fire and Merlin’s rattling breaths. The cold clings to everything, stinging and suffocating, and while Arthur has never been particularly prone to fancy, there is something about the wood that seems watchful. The darkness and the solitude prey on him like dogs gnawing at a bone, sending his thoughts round and round in ever-tightening circles.

If Merlin has magic, it means that magic has been close to him for all this time. Intimately, physically close, sharing the same bedroll, breathing the same air. For a long time he has looked on Merlin as an extension of himself, as close to a friend as a prince can ever get, someone who could be relied on to have his back no matter what. The loss of that trust is a sudden, startling hurt every time he thinks of it, like losing your footing on ground you thought was sure, and the fact that it’s because of magic only twists the knife. Magic has been the source of so much pain in his life.

And yet. He cannot bring himself to hate Merlin, and he will not stand back and watch him die. It is inexplicable and infuriating that it should be so, but he can’t deny it. Merlin has saved his life more times than he can count; probably more often than he knows. What he has always taken for luck has not been luck at all. Of course it would be Merlin who stands, unnoticed and unacknowledged, between Arthur and danger, whose small kindnesses serve to make the world a better, softer place. Wolves and bandits don’t just die by themselves, and

mountains don't watch over weary travellers. Snowy hillsides should not be safe places to camp after a mid-winter snowfall.

Not unless there's magic involved.

Merlin stirs in his sleep, and Arthur's arms tighten around him involuntarily, his cheek brushing Merlin's hair. After a moment, he turns his face into the soft strands and inhales, letting his eyelids close.

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In daylight, he extricates himself with difficulty from his position and adds more wood to the fire, stoking it so that the orange flames lick high against the pale snow. He relieves himself behind a bush, then eats some of the dried meat from the night before and practices some feints and parries with a stick to work the blood back to his extremities. Through it all, Merlin sleeps, and Arthur becomes aware that he is waiting for him to wake, to stir, to make some smart remark as if that were a sign that would release him to go about his day. Annoyed with himself, he throws the stick back into the undergrowth and stalks away from the makeshift camp into the forest.

He does not go far. On this side of the mountain, the trees taper out gradually into scrub-covered rocks and sheer cliffs, rising steeply into the mists above him, dropping suddenly away below. He gathers some more wood for the fire and the requisite kindling, then spies a snarl of berry-bushes that still bear the last of their remaining autumn fruit. He harvests as many as he can carry, twisting them from their prickly beds with a sharp pinch between finger and thumb, using the remains of his tunic as a makeshift basket. It is not, he thinks, his imagination that the bushes seem unexpectedly flush for so late in the season, or that the bushes themselves seem to be larger now than they were when he first looked at them.

"All right," he says quietly, though he'd deny it if he thought that anyone heard. "We'll take care of him together. Both of us."

Another berry bursts into view on the branch in front of him, fat and plump and red. A raspberry. On a blackberry bush. Arthur smiles helplessly as he plucks it off and pops it into his mouth.

“Thank you.”

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When he returns to the campfire, Merlin is awake and sitting up, his cheeks flushed but his eyes clearer than they have been for days. He turns at Arthur’s approach, and the prince drops berries and branches at his feet without ceremony, trying not to think of his hunting dogs and the way they would deposit their catch before him in much the same way, wagging their tails as they gazed up at him in search of praise.

“You’re still here.”

“So you keep telling me.” Arthur can’t tell if Merlin is disappointed or just confused by the fact and doesn’t ask. He moves to crouch next to his manservant, checking automatically for signs of fever. Although his voice brooks no room for tenderness, the hand he brushes over Merlin’s forehead lingers longer than is strictly necessary. “I’d worry about the possibility of the fever affecting your brain, but I know your observational skills have always been this poor. How are you feeling?”

Merlin glares at him through puffy eyelids. “Why do you care?”

“I told you, I’m banishing you,” Arthur reminds him. “I can’t exactly do that if you’re dead.”

Merlin heaves a disgruntled sigh and turns away, his mouth set in a sulky line. “I’m fine,” he says. Considering he’d said the same thing when he was bleeding out from a belly wound, Arthur is hardly inclined to take his word for it and tells him so.

“All right, fine. My head is full of cotton, my throat hurts, and I feel like someone stabbed a hole in my side with a burning poker.” His mouth pulls tight, then falters. “I also remember something about being mauled by a wolf?”

He says it tentatively, as if it might have been a fever dream. Arthur nods. “You’ve certainly been through the wars,” he says in a neutral tone.

Merlin looks up at him, frowning. “You…” He doesn’t need to say it;

the evidence is right there before him, in their little camp, the supplies Arthur had been carrying. “Why did you help me?”

Arthur wants to laugh, but can’t quite muster the breath. “Why did you save my life?” he counters, folding his arms. “You could have just let me die.”

Merlin’s cheeks darken. “You don’t owe me for that.”

“No?” Arthur says equably. “Perhaps not. But I’m starting to think I owe you for a lot more.”

Surprise flares in Merlin’s eyes. Arthur settles into the snow at his side, leaning against the tree for support. In the small hours of the previous night, he had begun adding things up, measuring the weight of Merlin’s silences and unaccountable bruises, the poorly excused absences, the dark shadows under his eyes. The equation came out the same way every time.

“You were the one who sent that light,” he says. “When I went to retrieve the Mortaeus flower.”

Merlin says nothing.

“You killed the afanc.”

No answer. Merlin shifts, staring at his fingers, which he has laced through the holes in his jacket.

“You saved me from the Questing Beast.”

This time, Merlin looks away, the ghost of some old pain stirring in his face, and Arthur presses:

“You defeated Cornelius Sigan; you knew about the troll. You stopped me from killing my father. Do you need me to go on? I haven’t put it all together yet, but I’m certain I can guess at least some of it. You’ve been protecting me.”

Merlin shakes his head. “You have no obligation to me for any of that. It wasn’t—I didn’t do it for some kind of political gain.”

“Then why *did* you do it?” Arthur asks. In the grand scheme of things, the reason is irrelevant—Uther would still have him put to death anyway—but he can’t suppress the need to know once and for all. Merlin sits and looks at his hands, at the stains of the dark berries on

Arthur's tunic and the trailing threads from its ragged edges. He doesn't say anything.

"Am I meant to imagine it was simply out of loyalty to the Crown?"

Merlin huffs out a laugh. "I wasn't even born in Camelot. You know I don't care about the Crown."

Arthur waits.

"There is—a prophecy," Merlin says haltingly. "The Once and Future King. The Druids believe he—you—will unite all of Albion, and bring the magic back to the land."

"Is that what you believe?"

"That's not…why I did it," Merlin answers, evading the question. He worries at the hem of Arthur's cloak, running the softness of the cloth between his fingers as if he's never touched something so fine before. "It's why I stayed in Camelot. Before. When I first arrived, I walked straight into an execution, and I wanted to run, then. But there was Gaius, and the Dragon said— "

"The *Dragon*!"

Merlin waves a hand, which Arthur interprets to mean *I'll explain that part later*. "He said I had a destiny. To protect you."

"And so you stayed," Arthur says, tasting disappointment. "Even though you believed I'd run you through at the first opportunity?"

Merlin gives him a strange look. "I never thought that, Arthur."

"But you were afraid of me."

"I was afraid you'd make me leave." He looks up, meeting Arthur's eyes head-on, the way he faces everything, and Arthur is acutely conscious that getting Merlin out of Camelot had been his first and only thought; that Merlin knows him in some ways better than he knows himself. "I thought you'd hate me, and I couldn't bear it."

And in some ways, Merlin doesn't know him at all.

The words sit heavily between them, and Merlin sags back against the tree trunk with his head hanging, as if it's taken all of his strength to say them out loud. They should not be speaking of this when he is still so ill. They should not be speaking of it at all, except that there may

be no other time. Silently, Arthur picks up a small handful of snow and applies it to Merlin's nape, ignoring his hiss at the cold, and answers the question he hadn't asked.

"I don't hate you."

He had tried to hate Merlin—oh, how he had tried, but in the end he had failed miserably, in spite of everything his father had said and everything Merlin had done. It was impossible to hate Merlin.

He holds Merlin's gaze, letting him absorb that statement, turn it over and examine it from all angles. The snow melts gradually under his hand, leaving his numbed fingers pressed against Merlin's neck. "You can't stay," he says softly, finally. "It's too dangerous."

"Arthur…"

"No."

Arthur reaches up to touch Merlin's cheek and lets his thumb trail slow and certain beneath that full lower lip; an unambiguous gesture, like baring his metaphorical throat to the wolf and trusting it not to bite.

"I have no intention of watching you die," Arthur says, his voice low, and Merlin sucks in a sudden breath.

"Arthur." He sounds shaken. "I've always been careful."

"Not careful enough." If someone else had seen him, if Arthur had been a different man, they would not be having this conversation. Merlin had knelt for him in the forest after saving his life, as if he knew the next blow of Arthur's sword must surely stand in for an executioner's axe, and there had been no caution in him then. Just regret, and apologies Arthur had refused to hear. "If you stay, he will not spare you for my sake. I will not be able to protect you."

"I can protect myself."

Arthur snorts.

"I can," Merlin insists, but there's a smile in his voice now, something more like the teasing Arthur is accustomed to. He sits up, cautious still with his injured side, and stretches out a hand. Before Arthur can think to stop him, he murmurs, "*Drakan*."

The ashes in front of them stir. As Arthur watches, a shape surfaces out of the fire, hanging in the air in front of him in a manner that is disconcertingly lifelike. It hovers there for a moment like the brief after-image of a lighted torch traced through the air, then it unfurls its wings and soars upwards, disappearing into the sunlight like ash.

When Arthur looks back, Merlin is watching him.

“It was always meant for you,” he says. “The magic.”

He says it like he’s offering a gift, and Arthur aches with the desire to take it. “And if I refuse to accept it?”

“Then I’ll go.” Merlin swallows hard. “But I had hoped…I don’t want to leave you.”

Arthur doesn’t want him to leave, either; but what Arthur wants and what he knows would be the most prudent course of action aren’t always the same thing. He makes one last attempt to heed his better judgment.

“What about my father?”

“I’ve survived this long. Unless…” He looks at Arthur. “Were you planning on telling him?”

That, at least, he can answer. “No.”

“You’d lie to the king, for me?”

“I never lie to the king.” Then, seeing Merlin’s expression, he adds, “Everything I tell him is the absolute truth.” A pause. “Everything I *tell* him.”

They regard each other. Merlin is gaunt and still sickly, hollows carved out of his face by the angle of the sun’s rays across his cheekbones. The fever has taken weight he could ill afford to lose, and he looks fragile and translucent in the sunlight, as if it might be possible to see the bones through the skin if Arthur looks hard enough.

“So,” Merlin says. He licks his lips. “Can I come home, then?”

Home.

Arthur looks away down the mountain, above the tops of the trees clustering around them. Camelot is several days hard ride away;

longer, on foot. There will be search parties out looking for the prince by now, but they will be away to the east, where the patrol was slaughtered, not up here in the foothills on the way to the northern border.

“Is it any good for hunting?” Arthur asks, considering.

“What?”

“Your magic. Can it snare a rabbit, snatch a bird out of the sky? I already know you’re hopeless at catching game on your own, but I suppose that's largely by design.”

When he glances round, Merlin can barely hold his gaze, his eyes brimming and full. “I can try, sire.”

“Then I suppose you might be useful.” He allows himself a smile, small but very bright, and looks down at his hands. “As long as you can keep up, that is.”

It’s going to be a long road back, for both of them, but for the first time Arthur has no doubt that they’ll end up exactly where they’re meant to be: side by side.

Art by LeFayArt

Chapter Summary

A companion piece by the fabulous LeFayArt.

Chapter Notes

Back in the Before Time, I somehow managed to win Most Words Written for *Finish That Fic, Merlin!* 2020. The prize was a piece of art created by the amazing LeFayArt, which I was super stoked to receive today!

Check it out and leave the artist some love on tumblr!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!